

MUSEUM THEATRE GUIDE

DIARY OF THE DEPRESSION: A DAY IN THE LIFE

OVERVIEW

Museum theatre characters bring exhibit themes to life through dramatic performances that incorporate historical and universal themes. In this presentation, a costumed actor positioned in Area H, “Depression and War,” performs a six-minute monologue based on the diary of Mary Ruth Slaton of Hopkins County, then invites questions from the audience.

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

Topics

- Depression
- Farm life
- Women’s history

Academic expectations

- Historical Perspective
- Culture and Society
- Analysis of forms

BACKGROUND

History

The character of Mary Ruth Dawson was inspired by a diary kept by Mary Ruth Slaton of Hopkins County. Born in 1905, Mary Ruth McGuyer married Rex Slaton in 1933. Their life on a dark-fire tobacco farm was typical of many families of the period. Rex was responsible for the tobacco crop, while Mary Ruth kept a kitchen garden and a flock of chickens. Like many farms, the Slaton farm straddled past and present. The family was self-sufficient in some respects but took advantage of new technologies and trends when possible. Like many rural Kentuckians, the Slatons survived the Depression with more ease than some urban counterparts because they raised much of their own food and relied less on store-bought goods.

Setting

Mary Ruth’s performance is set on a dark-fire tobacco farm in Hopkins County in 1939. At this time, dark-fire is being replaced by burley tobacco. Rex is compensating by growing corn as well, and Mary Ruth keeps chickens. The farm is several miles from the nearest town, Madisonville, but Rex and Mary Ruth go to town at least once a week to shop, see a movie, and visit friends.

Character

Mary Ruth is a typical farm woman of the times. She is accomplished at gardening, cooking, sewing, and a variety of farm chores. At the same time, she takes pride in being a modern woman. She sews her own clothing but goes to town for permanent waves. She keeps up with current events and has voted twice for Roosevelt. Although she does not dislike her life on the farm, she escapes her daily round by reading, going to movies, and writing stories, which she submits to magazines.

Plot

Mary Ruth’s monologue is structured as a series of short discourses about aspects of her life. She discusses her role on the farm, the pride she takes in doing things by hand, her interest in “modern” things, like electricity and movies, and her dreams of becoming a writer.

Themes

- Gender roles on the farm
- Interplay of tradition and change
- Effects of the Depression on rural Kentucky

IN THE MUSEUM

The time of the performance will be posted in the exhibit area. The actress will arrive and begin without a formal introduction. You can help your students make the most of the performance by

- Briefing them ahead of time about what they are going to see;
- Seating them cross-legged on the floor to watch the performance and encouraging good audience etiquette during the monologue; and
- Leading the group in asking questions after the performance.

We rely on teachers and chaperones to make sure students behave well during performances, and we reserve the right to ask disruptive students or classes to leave.

AUDIENCE ETIQUETTE

- Show respect for the performers and other museum guests by not talking.
- Do not use recording devices, cameras, or laser-pointers during the performance.
- Do not touch or talking with performers unless instructed or encouraged to do so.

